

Thanksgiving

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I greet each one of you individually and feel proud to think that you would have enough interest to come here to this devotional and listen to the oldest living General Authority of the Church. I have outlived them all by many years.

I enjoyed the opening prayer, the beautiful music of the choir, the introduction given by your wonderful president, and your presence here this morning. What a beautiful day. What a glorious opportunity to be able to meet and worship in the name of the Lord, our God.

I have talked here so many times, I've almost run out of subjects. In trying to decide what I might say to you today that would be appropriate, I was reminded that next week we will celebrate Thanksgiving Day all over this great land of freedom and liberty in which we are privileged to live. And I thought of the words of the Lord to the Prophet Joseph contained in the Doctrine and Covenants where the Lord said that "against none is his wrath kindled, save those who confess not his hand in all things" (D&C 52:21). If we stop to think about it, there isn't one thing that we have in this world that we are not indebted to the Lord for. He created the earth and placed everything upon it—the fish of the sea, the fowl of the air, the animals, the trees, the flowers, the fruit, the

vegetables, the seeds with power to reproduce themselves. And then he created man and put him upon the earth and gave him dominion over it all. Isn't that wonderful? And then he enabled man and the animals and those other forms of life to reproduce themselves.

I like the first chapter of John in the New Testament, which reads like this:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men . . .

Which lighteth every man that cometh into the world.

And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.

[John 1:1, 3–4, 9, 14]

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After God had created man and everything in the world, he showed his love for the world by sending his Only Begotten Son to atone for the sins of the world and to bring about the resurrection of the dead, and by restoring the everlasting gospel to this earth after centuries of darkness. The gospel gives us a pattern to live by and teaches us where we came from, why we are here, and where we are going. If we understand the answers to these three questions, then life really has meaning for us.

We are indebted to the Lord, and I trust that as we approach Thanksgiving Day, we will make it more than a day of recreation and pleasure by reflecting on what we owe the Lord for the blessings that are ours.

While I was president of the mission in Atlanta, Georgia, one of our citizens, a Dr. Fisher, built a beautiful rose garden that covered acres. He opened it to the public without any charge, and there were mottoes hanging on the trees. One of the mottoes was a verse called "A Packet of Seeds"; and I liked it, so I copied it and memorized it. It goes like this:

*I paid a dime for a packet of seeds
And the clerk tossed them out with a flip.
"We have them assorted for every man's needs,"
He said with a smile on his lips.
"Pansies and poppies, asters and peas,
Ten cents a packet, now pick as you please."
Now seeds are just dimes to the man in the store,
And the dimes are the things that he needs.
And I have been to purchase them in seasons before
And have thought of them merely as seeds.
But as I purchased this package this time it occurred
to me,
"You have purchased a miracle here for a dime.
You have a dime's worth of mystery, destiny, fate.
You've a dime's worth of something no man can
create.
In this bright little package, isn't it odd,
You've a dime's worth of something known only to
God."*

You should realize that despite all the scientific knowledge in the world, even after the landing of the astronauts on the moon, the scientists can't make a seed and put in it the germ of life so that when it's put in the soil it will grow and have branches and leaves and flowers that are colored and perfumed, or that give you a fruit or a seed to reproduce itself. Think about it as you hold that little seed in your hand and realize the power that it has. No wonder the Lord said that "against none is his wrath kindled, save those who confess not his hands in all things" (D&C 59:21). And as we approach Thanksgiving Day, I'm sure our thoughts all turn back to our Pilgrim fathers who came to this land of America. They probably didn't name their first celebration "Thanksgiving Day"; that came, I think, in the time of George Washington. But they did have their feast day, and they did engage in prayer.

I had the privilege of filling a couple of missions in Holland, which is where the Pilgrims went when they left England, seeking a place where they could worship God according to the dictates of their own conscience. I preached in the little city of Leiden where they had lived. And I've been in the little church at Delft's Hoven outside of Rotterdam where the Pilgrims held their last meeting before setting sail for America. We met there with nearly a hundred missionaries when President Grant was president of the European mission, and he sang "The Flag Without a Stain." I will never forget that. It was wonderful to be in that place from which the Pilgrims left in the *Speedwell*. When they went to England they transferred onto the *Mayflower* and sailed across the Atlantic and landed on Plymouth Rock, which is another place I've been. And that country around Plymouth Rock is so stony I wonder how they could ever eke out an existence. I remember seeing a rock in front of one home that was so large it filled the whole front lot. But there were 122 of them who endured the

first winter; 51 died; and 4 families were wiped out entirely.

You remember the little story about Miles Standish who sent John Alden to Priscilla Mullins to propose marriage for him; and Priscilla listened to John Alden and said, "John, why don't you speak for yourself?" Now I am proud to tell you that on my mother's side I'm a descendant of John Alden and Priscilla who landed with the *Mayflower* on Plymouth Rock. I've a little grandson sitting down there who is a descendant too. (He doesn't know it, but now I've told him.)

Now, did they have the spirit of thanksgiving when they found themselves here in this land where they could start all over again? Let me just read you a few words: "They had landed at last on a frozen shore, bleak and dread. But they were so glad that as they knelt in prayer the very stones seemed warm and the snowflakes on their cheeks melted into tears of gratitude." Did they not have the spirit of thanksgiving when they landed here in America? The account then says, "Oh call it holy ground, the soil where first they stood. They have left unstained what there they found, freedom to worship God." That is what they have bequeathed to us, and I think Thanksgiving is a good time to recall what they did to open the way for this great nation to come forth.

The Book of Mormon tells us that America is a land of promise, a land choice above all other lands. Nephi said that whosoever should possess it must serve the God of the land or they would be swept off. And we have read in the Book of Mormon of the nations that have been swept off because they ceased to worship the God who had led them and their forefathers here to this land. We have a great responsibility as citizens in this land, for the Lord said that he would fight its battles and be its king, if we will just serve him. So it's appropriate at this time that we express our appreciation for this great land.

I like the words Moses used when he gave a blessing to the twelve tribes of Israel. When he blessed Joseph he promised him a new land in the utmost bowels of the everlasting hills (see Deut. 33:15). Now that isn't in Jerusalem because they don't have everlasting hills over there, and the prophets have never predicted a regathering of all nations to the land of Israel. But they have predicted the gathering of Israel to this land of America, which is the land of Joseph. And we are the only people in the world who know what that land is that Moses promised to Joseph. It was so great in his eyes as he received the revelations of the Holy Spirit that in describing the land he used the word "precious" five times in just four verses.

My daughter, who is sitting here with me, has been reading a book that one of your professors, Eugene England, just wrote on the life of Brigham Young. You will be impressed if you follow what the pioneers went through and learn of the courage that they had. Talk about miracles. Think how they left their lovely homes in Nauvoo and that beautiful temple for which they had sacrificed so much to head into a wilderness with no one at the other end of the journey to provide for them and no storage houses. When you consider what they suffered crossing the plains as they settled here in these valleys of the mountains, it is no wonder that the prophet Jeremiah said that the day would come when it should no longer be said, "The Lord liveth, that brought up the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt; But, the Lord liveth, that brought up the children of Israel from the land of the north, and from all the lands whither he had driven them" (Jeremiah 16:14-15). He also saw the day when the Lord should call for many fishers and many hunters who would fish them and hunt them from the hills and the mountains and the holes in the rocks. (see Jeremiah 16:16.) This refers to that great army of Mormon missionaries who travel all over the world, gathering the descendants of Israel. And then the Lord, through Jeremiah,

said that he would bring them one of a city and two of a family to Zion and would give them pastors after his own heart who would find them with knowledge and understanding.

We have so much to be grateful for. We are not here by chance. We are here because of the sacrifices of our pioneer fathers who came to this choice land that the Lord, according to the Book of Mormon, had hidden away from the eyes of the world that it should not be overrun. He preserved it for us, for the day and time in which we now live here in these valleys of the mountains.

Just after the last World War, Brother Walter Stover, who worked on our welfare committee, and with whom I've filled many assignments, presided over one of the German missions where our people were nearly starved to death. We sent welfare supplies to them. Later he was called to talk in one of our general conferences. As he stood up and reminisced about the conditions he had left behind in that land, he thanked God for this land of freedom and liberty in which he was privileged to live. He said, "I don't even object to paying my high taxes." We do a lot of grumbling sometimes. But if we'd stop, in the words of the song, and count our many blessings, we wouldn't be too concerned about the little dark clouds that arise occasionally, knowing that the God of heaven is watching over this land. He has decreed that upon this land shall be established the New Jerusalem, and he will come to his people here. And so we have a lot to be grateful for.

I want to read you a little statement that appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*, regarding the great achievements of this Church in settling here in these valleys of the mountains. "Just as the Saints once made the desert bloom through honeybee-like enterprise, so they have made their Church into the biggest, richest, strongest faith ever born on United States soil. It has grown fourfold since World War II to four million members, including one million

outside of the United States." The pioneers came where there was no one to welcome them and built the Church that is now growing so rapidly.

I am on the committee for the approval of new stakes of Zion. When I became the Presiding Bishop in 1938, we had 126 stakes in the entire Church. This year already we have approved over 130 new stakes. The work is rolling forth. We are lengthening our stride, as President Kimball has admonished us, and we are sending out more and more missionaries all the time.

And then I think of a statement made by President Wilford Woodruff in general conference—I think it was in 1898—when he told about the time when he first met the Prophet Joseph Smith and a group of brethren who were bearing testimony. After they were through, the Prophet Joseph said, "I have been very much interested and edified in your testimonies here tonight. But you know no more about the future destiny of this people than a babe upon its mother's lap. We're only a handful of Priesthood here tonight [compare that group to our last general priesthood meeting that was broadcast to over 2,200 different stations], but this Church will fill North and South America. It will fill the world, it will fill the Rocky Mountains and there will be tens of thousands go to the Rocky Mountains and they will open the door for the gospel to be preached unto the Lamanites."

We can see the fulfillment of that prophecy as we watch the many stakes of Zion being organized in Mexico and South America. There is one temple there, another being built in Mexico, and another approved to be built in Chile. Truly the prophecy of the Prophet Joseph is being fulfilled, and we are becoming a mighty people.

In the Doctrine and Covenants the Lord tells us that he has blessed us with commandments not a few. Some people don't like commandments; they want to do what they want

to do. They're like a stream of water without anything to guide it; it just runs wild. That's the way some people like to live. But the Lord said he has blessed us with commandments not a few. And I like that because as I study the holy scriptures I find that wherever the Lord has given us a commandment he has also promised us a blessing we can obtain by obeying the commandment he gives. For instance, in the book of Malachi the Lord said:

Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith . . . if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it.

And I will rebuke the devourer for your sakes, and he shall not destroy the fruits of your ground; neither shall your vine cast her fruit before the time in the field. . . .

And all nations shall call you blessed. [Mal. 3:10–12]

That's where we usually stop. But you will find a lot more in that chapter if you will read it. I'll put it in my own words: The people began arguing among themselves, saying, "Well, look at John over there. He's not a member of the Church, and he has more land and herds and stocks and bonds than any of us. And here's Brother Smith; he pays his tithing and fast offerings and helps to build meeting houses and sends his boys on missions and helps with the welfare program, and look what a time he is having getting along financially." The Lord listens to that kind of argument. We've listened to it. And I've found that the ones who complain about tithing are the ones who don't pay it. The men who pay their tithing don't complain. Now what did the Lord say he'd do about it? He caused that a book of remembrance should be written before him, and in that book should be recorded the names of those who serve the Lord. And I think he was referring to those who obey the law of

tithing, among other things. Then he said, "They shall be mine . . . in that day when I make up my jewels . . . Then shall ye return, and discern between . . . him that serveth God and him that serveth him not." (Mal. 3:17–18.)

When I was the Presiding Bishop of the Church and we had the award program for the boys of the Aaronic Priesthood and for the girls in that age group, we required them to be full tithe payers in order to get their awards. We weren't thinking of increasing the money in the coffers of the Church; we wanted every boy and girl in Israel to have his or her name recorded in that book of remembrance to be numbered among the Lord's jewels when he should come and claim them. If you have faith, is it any job to pay your tithes and offerings?

I always liked the little story President Grant used to tell about a woman who taught a Sunday School class. She took ten big red apples to Sunday School class and said to the students, "If I were willing to give you all of these apples, you'd be willing to give one back, wouldn't you?" They all agreed that they would. And I can still hear President Grant say, "But we have some Latter-day Saints who wouldn't give theirs back until they had taken a few big bites out of it."

Do we believe it when the Lord invites us to "turn unto me and I will turn unto you"? I shouldn't tell you this, I guess, but one good brother in Salt Lake has, four times now, brought me a check for \$2,500. This is money out of his business that he turns in in addition to his tithing. He said he does it because he wants the Lord to be on his side. The Lord said to his prophet of old, "Gather my Saints unto me, those who have made a covenant with me by sacrifice."

Now let us talk for just a minute about the Word of Wisdom. A lot of people fuss about it and do not like us to preach about it, but think of the promises the Lord made to those who will observe and keep the Word of Wisdom. They are promised that they "shall walk and

not faint," that the destroying angel should pass them by and not slay them as he did the children of Israel, and that they "shall find wisdom and great treasures of knowledge, even hidden treasures" (D&C 89:19–21). That promise is worth more than money.

I think of my experience through the years, traveling through the various missions where we've had youth firesides. I'm going to refer to one that was held in Carthage, Illinois, where the Prophet Joseph and his brother Hyrum were martyred. We held a fireside there on Sunday morning. We had it in the biggest chapel on the university campus. There were about 1,500 young people there; some of them had traveled for over a thousand miles to be there at that youth conference and to attend that fireside. We had a couple of benches down in front kept vacant for the young people who wanted to bear their testimonies. We met from eight in the morning until twelve noon, and there was not a minute's time lost. When one young person was nearly through bearing testimony, another would be standing right there by that microphone ready to take over. And there those young people who were gathered from all over the area, thousands of miles, would stand with tears in their voices and tears in their eyes bearing their testimonies, thanking God for the Mormon missionaries who had come to their homes and brought the gospel. I said to myself, "Talk about hidden knowledge; what more could you ask than that?"

I have a lot of rich friends and I enjoy them. Through them I can enjoy some of the comforts of life without having to pay for them. But I have never seen a tear of joy fall from the eyes of any of my rich friends because of anything they could buy with their money. However, I will tell you I've sat through many a meeting where tears of joy flowed from the eyes of those who were touched by the influence and power of the Spirit of the Lord. That's why we're worshipping here today—that we might feel that Spirit.

In closing, I'd like to read you something to show you what the reward is for this missionary work. This is a testimony I've copied from a letter that came from an airplane captain who had studied for the ministry and who then decided to be a pilot. We brought him into the Church, though, while we were grounded for a couple of hours. And this is from his letter:

The happiness I have experienced in my heart and soul since joining the Church is indescribable. I feel that meeting I had with you and President Kimball [but President Kimball didn't do any of the preaching; I did all the preaching] really set things in motion for me. Prior to that I had just been spinning my wheels and searching. Now I know that through the discovery of the restored truth of our Lord, my life has meaning and direction. I want to work for him and do his will.

Now let me read you one more testimony from a good woman who wrote in for information about the Church and who was sent a copy of *A Marvelous Work and a Wonder*. When she first wrote, she said, "Will you please inform me about your church, its aims and objectives. If your church is what I have been seeking for fifty-three years and never found in any church organization, I might be able to contribute. I am not a curiosity-seeking person nor a habitual joiner." Then after reading the book she wrote this: "I find your Church interesting. It quickens within me a feeling—what shall I call it—like a beautiful song I had known long, long ago but had forgotten." She described her feelings after having joined the Church: "I now have a serenity and composure and inner strength and inward joy which I never before possessed."

I could read you some more, but now it's time to close. Brothers and sisters, it is no wonder I like the name *A Marvelous Work and a Wonder*. Now remember that we don't have anything for which we're not indebted to the Lord. With all my heart and soul I thank him

for my membership in this Church, for the holy priesthood that I bear, for every opportunity of service that I've enjoyed in my life, for the love and confidence of the Saints of God throughout this world. I pray that God will bless each one

of you. And as you approach your Thanksgiving next week, may you realize what you owe the Lord, I pray, and leave you my blessing in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.